A NOTE ON THE PROHIBITION OF UTTERING THE NAME OF GOD

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The Name of God in its original form (י-ה-ו-ה the Tetragrammaton) appears hundreds of times in Torah scrolls but is not ever, under any circumstances, pronounced by the reader. Indeed, it would appear that since the destruction of the First Temple[1] almost 2,600 years ago, it has not been pronounced – except by one man, in one specific place and on one specific day each year: that is, the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol),* in the Second Temple, at one point in the Yom Kippur service.

Now, God has been popularly spoken of metaphorically as our Father in Heaven, but we do not feel guilty about referring to our earthly father by name. He is also the Lover of the people Israel, and we are commanded to love Him in return, but has there ever been another love affair wherein it is prohibited to speak the name of one of the lovers?

How did this unique situation come about? It seems to have emerged from a concept of the human self in biblical times. To the biblical mind, the individual consisted of not only a corporeal self, but also of what we would call today the psyche. This is quite different from the concept of "body and soul," apparently borrowed from the Greeks, that became so much a part of Judaism that most translations of the Bible reflect such a double nature of the human being. In the biblical concept, one's name, image, shadow, and even such appurtenances as clothing are all part of a person's psyche.

The Bible looked at the individual as an "extended self"; the identity of a person was not limited to the physical being. Everything associated with the self, and everything that could evoke the person's presence in another person's mind, was part of the self. All were essential, integral parts of the individual. The body was but one of the aspects. Even when the individual was corporeally absent, these other essential parts could evidence his or her existence. Nor were the parts regarded as separate entities, which were divisible. Any one of them could be considered the equivalent of the whole individual.

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(The biblical conception of man encompassed *pars pro toto*: any part of the individual was equal to the whole.)

In the Bible, the passing of personality or mission can be effected through simple contact with a part of another's personality. Clothes, for example, were part of the "extended self." When Aaron was about to die, word came to Moses to take Aaron and his son Eleazer up to Mt. Horeb. He was told to strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazer: *And Eleazer became priest in his father's stead* (Num. 20:26). Placing Aaron's garments upon Eleazer was not a mere symbolic ceremony; part of the personality of Aaron was passed on to the new High Priest. Similarly, when Elijah departed in the chariot, Elisha placed his mantle upon his shoulders and became his successor (II Kg. 2:13-15).

Hair, too, was considered part of the extended self which makes up the individual. Everything which applies to the hair of the individual affects his whole personality. The nazirite who vowed to be abstinent in honor of the Lord (Num. 6:2) devoting himself completely to God, was not permitted to cut his hair or shave his head. After the days of his abstinence were ended, he sacrificed several animals and then:

> *The nazirite shall shave his head at the door of the Tabernacle of the congregation. He shall take the hair of his consecrated head and put it on the fire, which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering. And the Priest shall take the shoulder of the ram when it is cooked and he shall put them on the hands of the of the Nazirite after he has shaved his consecrated head. And the Priest shall make them a wave offering before the Lord and after that the Nazir may drink wine* (Num. 6:18 ff.).

Thus the nazir, after his vow has been completed, renews his covenant with God by offering up the hair from his time as a nazir. By giving his hair, his personality, to God he renews his covenant and is to be treated as an ordinary individual.

Perhaps above all else, an individual's name was the supreme part of the personality. Because the name could represent the whole, our ancient fathers were fearful of pronouncing the Name of the Awesome Almighty God. It was

believed that since the name was equal to God's personality, the power which went with the name could be employed by the individual. Lest the people use the name of God for their own purposes, it was to be pronounced only by the High Priest, on the Day of Atonement, in the Holy of Holies.

Thus we no longer even know how to pronounce it. Whenever the tetragrammaton – the four letters of the Name – was written, it was always pronounced "*Adonai* [my Lord]." To make sure that we pronounce the Tetragrammaton as the word *Adonai*, the rabbis added the vowels of *Adonai* to the Tetragrammaton. Jewish tradition recommended that we use *Adonai* only in prayer, and use the word "*HaShem* [the Name]" on other occasions.

Today, such fears do not influence us. However, accepting nevertheless the prohibition on pronouncing the Ineffable Tetragrammaton is one way we demonstrate our respect and reverence for the one truly unique Power that fashions our lives.

NOTES

1. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 7:680.

QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book TORAH DIALOGUES

1. List some of the seven commandments given to all mankind.

2. In the list of materials used in building the Tabernacle, one common substance is missing. Its absence provides historical and spiritual lessons. What is the element and what do we learn from its omission here?

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